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Order, Order

The orders

I first came upon Love's orders of language in Pablé and Hutton's 2015 book. In it, they write:

First-order refers to: here-and-now activity, on-going communicational activity, contextually meaningful behaviour: it is situated, happening in real-time and real-space, and unfolds in unplanned ways. (Pablé & Hutton, 2015, pp. 28-29)

Here we are, then, doing a first-order activity, me, writing this now; you, reading this later, but also now. The immediacy of the first order is what appeals. It suggests a certain freedom: 'unfolding in unplanned ways', not relying on a 'fixed code'. The second order, by contrast, one immediately assumes, is restrictive and impeding; an objectification of experience into categories that takes away spontaneity, and remains at a remove from *action*.

There is a sense in which second-order considerations are seen to get in the way of or inhibit action. The use of the term 'first-order' communication, Love says, is to 'guard against certain misunderstandings, and to emphasise that we're talking about the communicative process as something we engage in, something we *do*, without importing any preconceptions about *how* it is done' (Love, 2015). And the labels – 'first' and 'second' – are in no way neutral: they establish a hierarchy¹. From Pablé and Hutton again:

In calling a practice or form of analysis 'second-order' we are tacitly admitting the priority of situated communication against which the practice seems more abstract, more concerned with overt norms, and more conscious. (Pablé & Hutton, 2015, p. 29)

This 'tacitly admitting' is an interesting turn of phrase: are they active or passive agents in promoting this hierarchy? And also, by using the word 'more' – '*more* abstract, *more* concerned' – they indicate that within the definition of these two orders, there is a spectrum, as opposed to a dichotomy: in which case, there is first-order communication, and anything with a drop of linguistic reflection becomes second-order. This idealisation of purity in the first order can be seen as both a theoretical response to orthodox linguistics, in which the 'pure' language is not that manifested in any particular utterance, but is a removed ideal, and as a political

response to any attempt to portray some people's language as closer to the ideal than others. The orders 'guard against' these misunderstandings, and, intentionally or not, help to fend off the tyranny of orthodox linguists and anyone tempted to use language assessment as a measure of intelligence. They protect us against the dismissal of language-in-use as being but a poor relative to [a] 'real' language. So, it is intended to stand against, as Love writes,

a prescriptivist discourse about language conducted by a subset of the state's citizens who have come to be appointed guardians of the purity of its official language, with consequent marginalisation of the language of everyone else.
(Love, 2009, p. 44)

I would like first to emphasise my appreciation of this oppositional stance. Placed alongside other attempts to alter linguistic status, we can see an incremental change effected which has significantly reduced the impact of the hierarchy of dialects, although not entirely. 'Native speaker' languaging still retains the status of being closer to the 'pure' ideal; I benefit from both the development and the conservatism in this regard, being an English 'native speaker', though in an erstwhile denigrated Scottish dialect. The 'acceptability' of Scottish Standard English has increased, as have other regional dialects in the U.K. Due, in part, to changes made in educational policy, media expansion, and, in Scotland's case, increased political capital, the stigma attached to using regional dialects and accents has reduced. However, the high esteem in which 'native speaker' varieties of English are held has not similarly declined (Mackay, 2016b). Moreover, the editing this paper has undergone is also a purification of sorts, and although done in the name of clarity, the use and 'policing' of the academic register has its exclusive qualities, indexing, as it does, an ability to work with conventions learnt through years of educational training.

First orders: i. Pure, and ii. Contaminated

However, it seems to me that there are several problems with the orders of language, as I understand them. Love writes: 'We can certainly draw a distinction between "pure" first-order languaging and first-order languaging "contaminated" by (second-order) ideas about abstractions' (Love, 2015). I am immediately struck by the wording: 'pure' is a dubious term. It is often held as a moral ideal, in opposition to 'evil', 'dirty', 'mixed', 'stained', 'compromised', 'contaminated', etc., providing one term in an unhelpful (and on occasion harmful) dichotomy. Conceptually too, it is

difficult, being normative in both application – who regulates purity? – and in definition. In theory, ‘pure’ does not admit of degrees; in practice, even ‘pure gold’ labels a very high percentage of purity, not an unalloyed substance. Love’s scare quotes alert us to his ambivalence in using the terms, yet use them he has: unfortunate if he did not want the resonances of purity and contamination to be brought to bear.

The ‘fixed code’ model holds meaning to be pure, being set and defined; unadulterated by ambiguity and interpretation. Or more exactly, that the ambiguity which undeniably results, is caused by wrongful transference of the code, the responsibility for any ambiguity resting with people’s confused usage rather than with any inherent ambiguity within the code. And yet, with language (and every other semiotic system) we grapple, as speakers and as hearers; as interpreters. This inherent ambiguity contradicts the notion of the fixed-code which integrationism sets itself up against. Love’s first order – an unreflexive doing of language – assumes that contextual factors matter, and that ambiguity of meaning is navigated and negotiated in every instance of here-and-now language use. It is worth pointing out that the ‘fixed-code’ fallacy is possibly not as widespread as it once may have been, or, in any case, certainly not as cut-and-dried as Roy Harris, founder of the integrationist movement with which Love has identified himself, depicted it. Love writes:

A language is not a device which, if operated in accordance with the instruction manual, automatically yields something objectively discernible as ‘communication’. (Love, 1998, p. 99)

I am not aware of any present-day linguists subscribing to – or promoting – a fixed-code theory, although many may fail to acknowledge the extent to which ambiguity is present, and contextual cues relevant. About those holding this watered-down fixed-code loyalty, Love writes:

[F]ar from pointing to a need for a radical redefinition of his subject matter, indeterminacy is something that the [descriptive] linguist may well decide that he can live with. He is apparently not ineluctably bound to take it that the indeterminacy of linguistic units demonstrates their non-existence. On the contrary, he may feel free to hold that utterances are *for the most part* readily analyzable as manifestations of abstract units, and that such units can be *more or less* reliably identified and inventoried at the various levels of linguistic description [...] (italics in original, Love, 1998, pp. 98-99)

Such a ‘weak claim’ (p.98) is, according to Love, an ‘indefensible attitude’ (p.99). First-order communication has no recourse to ‘inventories’ of meaning.

The sub-discipline of Social Semiotics, influenced by Marx, Voloshinov, and Halliday, has, since the early 1980s, been arguing for the role of the language-user to be placed centrally, and for agency and imagination in semiotic production and interpretation to be foregrounded. In the seminal text by Hodge and Kress, we read the following:

Traditional semiotics likes to assume that the relevant meanings are frozen and fixed in the text itself, to be extracted and decoded by the analyst by reference to a coding system that is impersonal and neutral, and universal for users of the code. Social semiotics cannot assume that texts produce exactly the meanings and effects that their authors hope for: it is precisely the struggles and their uncertain outcomes that must be studied at the level of social action, and their effects in the production of meaning. (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 12).

We can read Hodge and Kress’s ‘traditional semiotics’ as the equivalent to Harris’s ‘orthodox linguistics’, similarly committed to the fixity of meaning. We can see, too, that the ‘level of social action’ is semi-equivalent to ‘contaminated’ first-order languaging – although the Marxist leanings of the early social semioticians comes through in the choice of the words ‘neutral’ and ‘struggles’; a political cast that is generally missing in the integrationist work. The ‘social’ of ‘social semiotics’, is the crux of the difference between the two approaches: while integrationists, wedded to meaning being made always *and only* in the moment, cannot then accommodate the notion of shared meaning, social semioticians, although agreeing that ‘meaning is always negotiated in the semiotic process’ (ibid.), focus on how this is commensurate with ‘the flow of discourse in constructing meanings around texts’, and how it is then possible – for the sake of academic study – to turn ‘this process itself into kinds of text’ (ibid.). For integrationism, ‘nothing is given in advance in communication; signs are created in the here-and-now; the relationship between words and ideas, and words and things, is not fixed: “meaning is always now”’ (Pablé & Hutton, 2015, p. 44). That is, one of the main sites of weakness for integrationism – its inability (because of the strictures it puts upon itself) to theorise beyond the individual and the here-and-now except by each integrationist projecting his or her personal experience of language and communication onto everyone (cf. Mackay, 2016a) – is the focal point of social semiotics.

Simultaneously with the emergence of social semiotics, in the early 1980s, the establishment of critical linguistics laid the ground for the founding, in 1991, of a critical discourse analytic approach – or critical discourse studies (CDS) – which brought together various academics with a shared interest in politically engaged research. CDS has at its core the belief that all language use is political, contextually determined, normative, and very much un-fixed. One of the strains of CDS has been that developed principally by van Dijk, namely the sociocognitive approach, which is interested in the study of mental representations and the processes of language users when they produce and comprehend discourse and participate in verbal interaction, as well as in the knowledge, ideologies and other beliefs shared by social groups. (van Dijk, 2009, p. 64)

The insistence upon the indeterminacy of the word – shared by those within social semiotics and critical discourse studies – has, as I said earlier, been a valuable contribution. But the way it has been done by the integrationists means, I believe, that one fallacy is sacrificed and another set up in its place. Put simply, the fallacy of there being a ‘fixed code’ is exposed, and replaced by the fallacy of the existence of a pure first order.

First order(s) in context

What *is* first order? It is in the here-and-now, it is communicative process. It is that which is unstained by *considerations* of language, by linguistic abstractions. But within first-order experience, it is possible (indeed, necessary) to bring to bear one’s past linguistic experience, one’s cultural sensitivities. In recent explanatory notes, Love says:

Writing this, I am eventually going to cause marks to appear on your screen to which I hope you can attach some *fairly specific significance* [...] This hope is founded on the *assumption that you will have considerable experience of both encountering and producing inscriptions in various respects similar* to those you are now scanning. If I am right in that assumption, then we are engaging in what I would call first-order linguistic communication. (Love, 2015)

This ‘considerable experience in various respects similar’ is another way of saying shared cultural knowledge. And of what is that constituted if not by second-order abstractions, generalisations, linguistic (and more widely semiotic) entities? If, during this first-order activity, I must rely on the assumption that you can draw parallels with

what I am doing and saying, and with what you have prior experience of, isn't *culture* the resource you call upon? I am relying on your having made generalisations, which have come about through abstracting some element out of the flow of experience. This 'enculturation' is not a determinate fixed-code knowledge, but neither is it something entirely unfixed. A culture – a resource of shared assumptions and beliefs – is created by identifying (both explicitly and implicitly) things of meaning – of value – both positive and negative. How can you simultaneously bring *something* to bear on present experience – an 'assumption' – and still imagine that experience to be untouched by second-order practices?

In another paper, Love (Love, p. 5) quotes Harris from *The Language Myth* (1981):

Secondly, what is important from an integrational perspective is not so much the fund of past linguistic experience as the individual's adaptive use of it to meet the communicational requirements of the present. (Harris, p.187)

Love follows this up on the following page by stressing the point: 'We want to know what general form that fund might take' (Love, p. 6). So, within first-order communicating, both as producers and as interpreters, we access our prior experiences, drawing upon a 'fund of past linguistic experience', our 'demythologised *linguistic knowledge*' (italics in original, Love, p. 6). Unless the idea is that we have access to a searchable memory of every linguistic interaction we have ever been party to, a 'fund' is going to have to involve classification – and that involves abstractions. Two things are striking here: one, that first order is under threat of meaning simply something like 'communication in which none of the participants explicitly flag-up their use of linguistic abstractions'; and two, that van Dijk's sociocognitive model may offer a way to conceive of the fund in a way that preserves the individual's primacy, yet bridges the gap – between the individual's 'fund' and the society's influence upon communication – which is insurmountable for integrationism, well, *pure* integrationism anyway.

Love writes the following:

As a speaker my task is creatively to deploy parts of that experience so as to maximise the likelihood that you will perceive contextually relevant similarities between my utterance here and now and other utterances you are likely to have come across. As a hearer I have to do my best to understand you in the light of that same experience. (Love, pp. 6-7)

There is a lot built into this: on the one hand, as we would expect, we have importance placed upon creativity and personal experience; on the other hand, one has to deploy parts of an experience, and to do so based on a judgement about our interlocutor's judgement about what is 'contextually relevant'. 'Deploying parts of an experience': how are we to do that, exactly? We have experiences, we remember some of them, but we cannot *deploy* parts of an experience. What we *can* do – but this is well and truly into the realm of categorisation and abstraction and thus second-order – is to generalise from our experiences so as to learn from them, and then deploy what we have learnt (what we have selected, based on our own or others' criteria about what is of value to us). Love himself recognises the complexity involved when he writes about the 'implicit memory' 'it seems that speakers have' and which 'enable[s] them to assess' (Love, p. 11):

The term implicit memory itself suggests that experience with language is remembered in a far from straightforward way. There are many dimensions in terms of which the raw linguistic event may be categorised, classified or analysed. (Love, p. 11)

I assume that the 'raw linguistic event' is another (more poetic, less hierarchical: in my view better) stab at naming 'first-order' communication. If so, however, we have here again the contradiction that the first-order communication occurring in the here-and-now relies on the deployment of things learnt from implicit linguistic memories of prior first-order communicative events, and is, simultaneously, memory-fodder for selected other here-and-now interactions. Or to put it more simply: first-order communication, *notionally without linguistic reflection*, relies on the speaker/hearer to use their fund of prior (first-order) experiences to navigate the present; this first-order experience then joins the fund which is an essential resource for the next first-order experience.

This deployment of experience – conflating a number of complex processes – depends, as Love acknowledges, on context. Context, according to van Dijk is a subjective mental representation, a dynamic online model, of the participants about the for-them-now relative properties of the communicative situation. I call such a representation a *context model*. It is this mental 'definition of the situation' that controls the adequate adaptation of discourse production and comprehension to their social environment. (Van Dijk, 2008a 2009)

What van Dijk offers here is a way by which the subjective is made amenable to the socially shared. He goes on to say that ‘this is just one of the ways in which cognition, society and discourse are deeply and mutually integrated in interaction’ (ibid.).

‘Pure’ First Order

I have tried to think of an example of ‘pure’ first-order communication. I cannot. In a fundamental sense language (both spoken and written), having attached to it what Love calls ‘some fairly specific significance that goes beyond [its] intrinsic [...] properties’ (Love, 2015), is already ‘second-order’, if dealing with abstractions is a second-order characteristic. The word ‘table’, clearly, has nothing inherently table-like to it: the understanding of it (to use it or to comprehend it) involves not only a recognition of a ‘type’ (a generalised phonetic form of which this example is a token, and a generalised conceptual form), but, prior to that, both the understanding that human sounds *can* signify and that our here-and-now experience can be usefully classified into discrete phenomena. Abstraction and generalisation are necessary not only for all language, but for all comprehension.

Looking back through the literature, I see that the question of ‘pure’ first-order communication is a recurring theme. ‘Pure’ first-order communication is possibly found – according to Love – in:

- i) Primitive man’s first utterance understood by another. Love writes that “‘Phylogenetically”, the earliest languaging must have been first-order languaging in its purest form.’
(‘Purest’ seeming to back up my understanding of a scale of purity)
- ii) An infant’s first use of language.
- iii) Or in one’s initial exposure to a foreign language, specifically, ‘when today you understand an utterance in a foreign language of which you know nothing’ (Love, 2015).

The first is a matter of linguistic speculation and not amenable to much else; the second and third seem faulty in the rather obvious sense that in both instances, the enculturation has already begun before the production of language takes place: in the sense that the child has been immersed in a linguistic world certainly from birth – or earlier, from inside the womb – and the language learner functions in a linguistic world and utilises lessons learnt from their past linguistic experience to the new environment (as discussed further below).

The notion of a pure first order did, however, remind me of what I have learnt about people with autism, in the work of the neurologist, Oliver Sacks, known best for the books in which he conveyed to a wider public insights gained during his experience as a medical practitioner, researcher, and academic. In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985), Sacks reflects on a quote:

‘No man is an island, entire of itself,’ wrote Donne. But this is precisely what autism is – an island, cut off from the main [...] (Sacks, 1985, p. 221)

At this point Sacks is discussing an autistic artist, José, and wonders how he could be given a place in society rather than simply in an institution. He asks:

Could he, with his fine eye, and great love of plants, make illustrations for botanical works or herbals? [...] Could he accompany scientific expeditions, and make drawings [...] of rare species? His pure concentration on the thing before him would make him ideal in such situations. Or (since he cannot read, and sees letters only as pure and beautiful forms) could he not illustrate, and elaborate, the gorgeous capitals of manuscript breviaries and missals? (ibid.)

Is this not a clearer description of first-order communication? Devoid of abstractions and of cultural references that enables one to both make and navigate meanings; in which the written word, and to a large degree the spoken word, are not resources for communication? The farther along the autistic spectrum one goes – the more deeply autistic a person is – the comprehension of signification, of all things linguistic, lessens until, as far as it is understood, sensory chaos is the defining characteristic of that person’s external world. Sacks explains:

The abstract, the categorical, has no interest for the autistic person – the concrete, the particular, the singular, is all [...] Lacking, or indisposed to, the general, the autistic seem to compose their world picture entirely of particulars. Thus they live, not in a universe, but in what William James [1895, p.10] called a ‘multiverse’, of innumerable, exact, and passionately intense particulars. (Sacks, 1985, pp. 218-219)

These two modes of existing – in a multiverse and in a universe – may map well onto the first- and second- orders. And at this point I think that the tenor of the classifications – with ‘first’ being pure and ‘second’ being sullied, may qualify for a reappraisal. Pure first-order communication (as pure as it can get using a signifying system) cannot have recourse to linguistic abstractions. Through linguistic abstractions we are able to generalise, to anticipate, to discern, to understand. In fact,

we cannot help but use second-order processes: we are compelled to bring our cultural knowledge to bear on a situation and to try and understand it linguistically and semiotically. Even when faced with nonsense, we make a stab at an interpretation, using the pregnancy of words, and any context we see fit to think relevant. That is, the culturally imbued richness and ambiguity of language is exploited by us as we attempt to forge an understanding.

Love gives, as an example of languaging, ‘understand[ing] an utterance in a foreign language of which you know nothing’ (Love, 2015), but in fact, without any context, without recourse to any linguistic, spatial, temporal or cultural second-order categories, there could be no such ‘understanding’, for the simple reason – again – that in order to understand, we need to have *something* upon which to base our attempt to comprehend. It could be countered that it is solely *linguistic* second-order categories we have done without, but why would that be the case? We do not lose our awareness of second-order linguistic categories because we are addressed in a foreign language: in this instance more than most, we bring to bear all the metalinguistic knowledge we can, and we use it to try to understand. Common communicative failures such as believing we have just learnt the word for ‘water’, when in fact we heard ‘drink’, or thinking we had picked up ‘jump’, when in fact what we were being told was ‘over’, demonstrates our deployment of second-order categories.

Love writes:

If we are to render our first-order activities as users of language amenable to contemplation and inquiry conducted by means of language itself, we must abstract certain aspects of those activities from the behavioural continuum in which they are embedded and set them up as *objects*. (Love, 2009, p. 44)

There is a chicken-and-egg situation here: I would argue that to act within the perceptual continuum of life, we must first discern. Discernment requires objectification and, thus, abstraction. Therefore, *in order to* undertake any ‘first-order activities’, ‘contemplation and inquiry’ are necessary. This is a fundamentally phenomenological point addressed by Merleau-Ponty:

The supposed conditions of perception become anterior to perception itself only when, rather than describing the perceptual phenomenon as a primary opening up to an object, we presuppose around it a milieu in which all of the developments and all of the cross-checking that will be performed by analytical perception are already inscribed, and in which all of the norms of

actual perception will be justified – a realm of truth, a *world*. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 17)

He continues with an example:

If I am walking on a beach toward a boat that has run aground, and if the funnel or the mast merges with the forest that borders the dune, then there will be a moment in which these details suddenly reunite with the boat and become welded to it [...] Afterward I recognized, as justifications for the change, the resemblance and the contiguity of what I call ‘stimuli’, that is, the most determinate phenomena obtained from up close and with which I compose the ‘true’ world. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 18)

Our ability to ‘compose the ‘true world’’ is what Sacks describes as missing in those deeply autistic individuals whose multiverses do not cohere into a universe.

Essential Second Order

Running through descriptions of the second order is the idea that it is less essential in life than the ‘first order’ – that it is *secondary*, and that we could do without it. Here again I was reminded of one of Sacks’ patients, an autistic scientist called Temple Grandin, for whom the second-order classification and systematization of linguistic terms was crucial to her here-and-nows, and to her becoming a successful scientist. She is the person whose self-description of how she often felt amongst humans became the title of Sacks’ book *An Anthropologist on Mars* (1995):

It has to do, she has inferred, with an implicit knowledge of social conventions and codes, of cultural presuppositions of every sort. This implicit knowledge, which every normal person accumulates and generates throughout life on the basis of experience and encounters with others, Temple seems to be largely devoid of. Lacking it, she has instead to compute: others’ intentions and states of mind, to try and make algorithmic, explicit, what for the rest of us is second nature. [...] She remained clearly autistic, but her new powers of language and communication now gave her an anchor, some ability to master what had been total chaos before. (Sacks, 1995, p. 258)

Temple Grandin herself uses the term ‘normal person’ normatively, though without according it a more positive status than that of ‘autistic person’. The meanings of words in dictionaries, the common human responses reified and classified in science journals were all she had to go on – these were what gave her ‘new powers of

language and communication’. Words are clearly not determinate, but they provided enough of an anchor that she could function in the world – albeit on a purely professional basis, her life lacking in any real interpersonal relationships. As she put it, she still didn’t ‘get it’, but she could exist alongside it.

Autism as a condition is complex and multi-spectrumed. One spectrum is that along which the autistic artist, José, exists: largely unable to integrate second-order into life at all – and thereby unable to have any degree of linguistic signification. Another spectrum is that on which Temple Grandin is placed: largely unable to do spontaneous ‘linguaging’ of the type Love calls ‘first-order’, and relying heavily on second-order abstractions and classifications to navigate – uncomfortably and partially – her here-and-now existence. It seems to me that we are lucky in being able to intuitively mingle linguaging with second-order abstractions. They are inseparable in practice, and for those of us who are not pathologically incapable of intuition, generalization, or abstraction, the ease with which we achieve their balance blinds us to the fact that at all times we are working on first order and second-order levels simultaneously and seamlessly, threatening the orders with a status of redundancy – or perhaps relegation to post-second-order linguistic theorizing.

One big happy Orders

Thus far, then, I have attempted to call into question the existence of a pure first order by pointing out

- a. that the terms ‘pure’ and ‘contaminated’ are problematic,
- b. that there is a counter narrative to the integrationist one of an orthodox linguistics built on the ‘fixed code’ fallacy, in discourse analytic work that emphasises indeterminacy – which is not the same as a meaning-free-for-all,
- c. that the enculturation which the first order admits relies on the same practice of abstraction which defines second-order classification.
- d. that language is itself ‘second-order’.

However, I am not willing to say that all is second-order as it is delineated. It seems to me that if only first-order experiences have the quality of being here-and-now, by definition, this classification – first order – encompasses the whole of human experience. We cannot get out of the here-and-now. This article started as a conference paper, presented to others in the here-and-now, after being prepared at a

computer in the here-and-now; and here and now you are reading it in the here-and-now. Even the there-and-then exists only in recollection in the here-and-now.

Therefore this first-order quality has to be integrated with meaning making – yours and mine – which necessarily involves second-order processes.

Perhaps first and second order are mutually compatible, and not in conflict – not an either /or. Rather than viewing them as dichotomous, we may more profitably view them as qualities that can be made more or less explicit, and can be more or less salient within any particular and unique communicational event. The focus of our attention varies: we can be more analytical, or we can act impulsively, without consideration, although always in the here-and-now, and necessarily with recourse to the abstract reasoning that allows us to discern things in the world around us. In which case, the orders are aspects of our perception of languaging, that we have projected onto the acts of languaging which we perceive.

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ⁱ Love has expressed reservations about this reading (during the conference in Odense at which this paper was first delivered) arguing that ‘first’ and ‘second’ were not intended, by him, to reflect a hierarchy, but rather, to convey the onto- and phylogenetic priority of the first order. To imagine that such a ‘priority’ does not imply a hierarchy, seems odd.